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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [KIRF](#) [KISL](#) [FR](#)  
SUBJECT: FRENCH RESPONSE TO THE 2009 IRF REPORT

REF: A. SECSTATE 108536  
[1](#)B. PARIS 001442

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Kathy Allegrone, Reasons 1.  
4(b), (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Press and public reaction to the 2009 International Religious Freedom (IRF) report in France has been largely muted since its public release on October 26. However, in a follow up meeting, the MFA offered a more critical response to the report, characterizing the Scientology case and the burqa debate as judicial matters rather than religious issues as well as recommending ways to report on religious freedom issues in France in the future.  
END SUMMARY.

#### MINIMAL PRESS AND PUBLIC REACTION

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[1](#)2. (C) There has been little French public and press reaction since the report was released, despite the fact that it was the fourth most widely read IRF report in 2008, according to DRL internet site analysis. Readership may grow again this year once Embassy Paris posts the report in French on our website in late November.

#### DIFFERENT APPROACHES, SHARED GOALS

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[1](#)3. (C) Poloff delivered the 2009 IRF report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on October 27 and then reached out to the newly created MFA Religions Bureau (see reftel b) for a follow up meeting on October 30. The first of its kind in history, this new office was created on June 1 and is designed to look at international religious trends and their political implications for France. When asked about the MFA's response to the IRF report, the head of the Bureau Joseph Maila focused primarily on the difference in approach to writing the report and in the interpretation of issues. With its focus on secularism, Maila stressed that a report on religious freedom would not be published by the GOF in the same way, as France refrains from collecting statistics on its own ethnic and religious demographic. Maila underscored the French value of laicit (secularism) and remarked that the GOF defense of secularism represents not a divergence in values but a difference in approach in dealing with shared goals and similar challenges of managing large and diverse populations.

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT METHODOLOGY

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[1](#)4. (C) Maila stated that he learned much about his own country through our report but that some of the reporting raised questions in his own mind about our approach. Maila questioned the State Department methodology in writing the report, commenting that polls drawn from the Roman Catholic newspaper La Croix for example were not scientifically-based and resembled more the work of an NGO. He suggested verifying the material provided by our contacts and fact-checking with the GOF against possibly biased sources to ensure our neutrality as an international observer in France and to provide a more balanced report.

## LEGAL OR RELIGIOUS ISSUE

15. (C) Clearly stung by the opening lines in the report,s introductory remarks on France, Maila expressed disappointment that we chose to "finger-point" and directly accuse the GOF of discriminating against sects like Jehovah,s Witnesses. He further responded that the French state does not actively target the Church of Scientology but only seeks due process in the allegations of fraud. Emphasizing that the religion is not on trial in the high-profile Scientology case, Maila explained that the judicial determination was based on the facts of the case, not the beliefs of the members. He recognized our concerns about the implications of the dissolution or an effective ban on the Church of Scientology in France but continued to highlight the legal and not religious nature of the trial itself.

16. (C) When asked his views on the current burqa debate, Maila quickly applauded the work of the Parliamentary commission tasked with investigating the wearing of burqas in France. Calling the debate on national identity recently spurred by Immigration Minister Eric Besson a completely separate issue from the question of burqas, he spoke of the need to pro-actively study French integration and assimilation of minorities, stating that he believes secularism is under attack. Referring to the burqa controversy as fueled by politics and not a matter of religious discrimination, Maila said that the public space in France must reflect French values and cannot mimic the U.S. in that regard, which he commented has a greater visibility of ethnic minorities.

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## MFA RECOMMENDATIONS FOR 2010 REPORT: LOOK AT THE EUROPEAN NORM

17. (C) Calling the European regulations on religious freedom both normative and widely accepted, Maila asked that we look at the European position on religious freedom, since France shares a viewpoint consistent with its fellow EU members. Referencing the controversial case of the Sikh men who refused to take off their turbans, he stressed that the European Court of Human Rights ruled against them, stating that ears must be featured in photographs for security purposes. Applying the same logic to the wearing of burqas, Maila underscored the potential security threat the Islamic veils posed to French society. Emphasizing that the priority of the French state is to protect the individual and to preserve public order, he reiterated that the burqa debate raises the question of assimilation and not of clothes or religion. MFA Religion Bureau staffer Djilali Benchabane added that the report made no effort to acknowledge the evolution and steady progress made in France over the years. His colleague David Behar identified the real challenge of these country-specific reports as their tendency to ignore the tremendous efforts at the EU-level.

## ENHANCED ENGAGEMENT

18. (C) Maila commented that the Scientology case and the burqa debate do not represent the key issues in French domestic policy and in fact provided a distorted picture of what is actually going on in France. Moreover, he said that France feels "fingered" by the U.S. on these issues and is portrayed inaccurately as a country that persecutes religious minorities despite the fact that our two countries share the same constitutional protections and ultimately the same goals. The Religion Bureau asked for enhanced engagement with Embassy Paris and we committed to meeting on a regular basis. As the Parliamentary inquiry on burqas is due to present their findings and recommendations in late November and the appeal of the Scientology fraud conviction is likely to last several months, Embassy Paris will seek to engage in greater dialogue with the MFA to discuss the issues and raise our concerns with the GOF.

